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Visual Rhetoric: Analysis

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Weapon Against Injustice

Gordon Parks was a popular and respected photojournalist during his time. His legacy lives on in this very era and will continue on into the future. He photographed fashion trends from around the world. He took mesmerizing photographs of well-known celebrities such as Gloria Vanderbilt, Muhammad Ali, Malcom X, and Ingrid Bergman. And though his unique preservation of fashion trends and famous faces are of value to our memory and our nation’s history, Parks’ most affecting images were of everyday people who were not famous or recognized by the American public. These images captured people who were invisible to most of the world and the nation around them. If Gordon Parks hadn’t thoughtfully and creatively encapsulated their lives in print, they would still be invisible. Parks said that he was “…trying to document moments without proper names.” (Baker, 1)

Gordon Parks’ own history may have influenced his choice to capture the life of the poor and the insignificant. He was born in Kansas in 1912 to an incredibly poor family as the youngest of fifteen children. He faced a serious illness as a child and many say that Parks’ survival was a miracle. He tried to support himself in various ways until finally considering a career in photography around the age of twenty-five. He convinced the owner of a popular women’s boutique to allow him to work as a photographer of their fashion models. He was soon discovered by the wife of a famous boxer, Joe Louis, who convinced him to move to Chicago for better opportunity to learn and practice photography. He became a member of the South Side Community Arts Center in Harlem and his talent was quickly recognized. He worked for the photography section of the Farm Security Administration, documenting the poor, everyday life of citizens during the depression. Later, he accepted a job offer as staff photographer for *Life* Magazine and freelance photographer for *Vogue.* These jobs brought him numerous successes in his celebrity, fashion, and current event photography. These successes did not hinder his desire to photograph social injustices and everyday life as he did in his photography for the Farm Security Administration, however. He continued to capture the history of American individuals. Individuals who struggled to gain dignity and respect amongst poverty and racism. (Maskowitz, 102.) "Those people who want to use a camera should have something in mind, there's something they want to show, something they want to say..." Parks once explained. "I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty. I could have just as easily picked up a knife or a gun, like many of my childhood friends did... most of whom were murdered or put in prison... but I chose not to go that way. I felt that I could somehow subdue these evils by doing something beautiful that people recognize me by, and thus make a whole different life for myself, which has proved to be so." (Legends Online, pdn.gallery/legends)

Parks’ used photography as a weapon against what he saw as evil in the world. He captured the impact of segregation and racism in the southern town of Shady Grove, Alabama in 1956. He documented the story of a boy and his family in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1961. He produced an essay project that represented the struggle of a black family in Harlem. Through these projects, Parks created historical figures out of ordinary people, he helped society better understand their world and the evil within it, and he gave us brilliant insight into the past. I have chosen to analyze one image from each of these projects. Parks’ goal in each project was quite similar, providing a connection between each image. And yet the depiction of each image is quite different, providing opportunity to analyze and understand the significance of these differences. I will begin by analyzing each image individually and then bring them together to identify the threads that tie all three together to create a unified message. (Maskowitz, 102.)

(Legends Online, pdn.gallery/legends)

This title underneath this picture says “Flavio de Silva, Rio de Janeior, 1961.” Before researching information regarding the audience and facts behind this photo, I first want to analyze reaction without any background information. What would one automatically think of when viewing this image? What, to quote Ramage, is the gist of this photo to one who knows nothing of this project, this town, this child? One would first be struck with the poverty illustrated through this photo – the visibility of his bones through his skin, his face and body covered in cuts and dirt, his torn and dirty clothing. This is what I am first struck with when viewing this photograph, as were many I asked to view it. Flavio’s eyes, though, shine out past his impoverished body - giving a sense the aliveness and innocence in this child. The darkness and simplicity in the background leads us to an understanding of the simplicity and darkness found in his life while also encouraging us to focus on the child himself without distraction of a background.

A little research provides further information regarding the image, the child, and the audience – information that aids in moving past our first reaction to this photograph. This image was taken in what Parks described as the "dead center in the worst poverty I have ever encountered.” But rather than provide a broad view of the poverty, he focused on one individual affected by the larger picture of poverty. (Legends Online, pdn.gallery/legends) He was twelve years old when the image was taken and dying of tuberculosis, living with his family in a one-room shack. When Parks spoke with him, he noted that Flavio was quite unconcerned over his potential death and only cared whether his younger siblings were taken care of. “I definitely learned more from Flavio about character than Flavio learned from me,” Parks said. (Legends Online, pdn.gallery/legends) The audience that viewed this image was the readership of *Life* Magazine at the time, 1961. Much of the information above was included with the picture, so that readers were able to match a story behind the face.

This information may change our response to the image. It appeals to our emotions and to our sense of justice. The audience at the time would have felt pity for the poor child, for his family, and for the rest of his village. They may have felt anger over the injustice he was facing. The sense of the injustice of poverty would have been exaggerated as it shown affecting an innocent child. Why does this child have die of tuberculosis while taking care of his younger siblings as Billy next door runs around with his neighbors? The audience’s own experiences and identity would have also influenced their response to this photograph. They may have felt empathy if they had at one time experienced a poor living condition. A reader that had traveled to a poor section of the world would better be able to understand the boy’s experience, while a rich person living in New York City for their whole life may be more limited in truly grasping and understanding this injustice. As an audience viewing this photograph in 2012, I think that our reaction is similar to the reaction in 1961. Poverty is not something that has been resolved since 1961. Little children like Flavio still exist all over the world – and possibly still in the same village in which he was photographed. And so this image still appeals to our sense of justice and our emotions. Our hearts are still affected by evil things that affect innocent children. We know that this little boy is now grown, but we all can picture a similar little boy from a similar little village in a similar situation. Until poverty in our world has been vanquished, the image will continue to serve the timeless purpose of creating awareness of the injustice of poverty.

The readers of this article and its accompanied image gathered together over 35,000 dollars to bring this little boy to America. He was cured of his disease within two years. He safely returned to his family and was able to provide his family with a new house and his father with a new truck with the remaining money. Flavio is now living in Brazil with his children and grandchildren. The generous donations of so many *Life* readers prove that this photo appealed to reader’s emotions and called them to action.



(Legends Online, pdn.gallery/legends)

This second picture was shown accompanied with this text: “The Fontanelle Family: Bessie and Kenneth, Little Richard, Norman Jr. and Ellen at the Poverty Board in New York City, 1967.” What might be the first reaction to this photograph, without knowing or understanding the story behind this family? My first reaction was a feeling of sadness. You see sadness and exhaustion in the face of the mother and the children. We know from the title that they are at the Poverty Board in New York City. It looks as if this is their last resort – almost as if they are asking for help in simply surviving. The reactions of those I asked to view this photo echoed my first reaction.

Further analyzing leads us to further insight. Their clothing looks worn out, furthering our understanding of the extent of their poverty. They are standing close together, which may lead us to think that they are committed to getting through this together and that they are a close-knit family. The absence of the father leads us to ask questions about his respectability and his personality. Was he absent because he was too proud to ask for help? Was he looking for work? Was he drunk? The explanation is not offered within the photograph, the choice is up to the viewer. That choice, in turns, affects our understanding of the image. If we think that the father is absent because he is out looking for work, than we feel pity and yet respect for him and his family. If we conclude that he is absent due to pride or alcoholism, than we may feel pity for the mother and her children but anger towards the father. Our experience and our identity may influence which conclusion we come to, also.

The family pictured above is a family dealing with segregation and poor living conditions in Harlem. Gordon Park’s lived with this family for a month, documenting their life in both image and story. This image is one of many in a series. In this image, the family is requesting food and clothes as the father was unemployed and the children couldn’t attend school on account of lacking warm clothes. Parks’ goal in this series is to allow readers to step into the life of another. We are invited to peer into their everyday life, and this image is an example of that.

How, after better understanding what is pictured and the story behind it, how does it appeal to our emotions, our reason, and our sense of ethics? It acts much in the way that the first image did. The audience might feel pity for the mother and the children. Their faces beg the audience to feel pity and sadness over their situation. They might feel anger over the injustice – the lack of help for families like this and perhaps over racism. The experiences of the audience, as always, may affect the response. Is the one viewing this photograph a racist? Then he might think that this is the fate the family deserves. Is the spectator one who is angry with their own father who was too drunk to provide for his family? Then she might empathize with the mother and children while hating the father she assumes is absent for immoral reasons. And yet, Parks begs his audience to be aware of and take action toward such injustice, no matter their experience.

The *Life* readership, as they did with Flavio, raised a substantial amount of money to provide a home, food, and clothing for this family after the series was published. By capturing the life of a specific family, Parks allowed his audience to take part in a resolution. The audience in 1967 may have been more deeply moved by this image because it was happening in their own time, but we maintain a similar reaction. It may not being happening to that family in our time and there may be more help offered to families like that, but there are still similar situations. It still begs us to feel sad and angry over parallel injustices.

How do these two images connect? What is the thread that ties their differences together? We see one photo taken a small village in the country of Brazil halfway across the world, while we see another photo taken in a city most of have visited in our own country. One image depicts just one, impoverished child dying of tuberculosis standing in a dark, shack we can barely see in the image. The other depicts an entire family, sitting in the office of the Poverty Board in New York. They weren’t dying, their clothes weren’t ripped, and they didn’t look too malnourished. Flavio didn’t have a Poverty Board where he could go and request help. And yet there is still one message that emerges from each of these.

Each of these images appeal most heavily to our sense of injustice. We want to do something as a result of viewing these photographs. We want to help little boys like Flavio and his family. We want to help families like the Fontanelle family. Though the results of these photographs are quite different, the purpose and the goal of the photographer is the same. He mentioned that he picked up a camera as a weapon against what he hates in the world – poverty, injustice, and racism. That is the thread that ties these images together. It is asking us to hate what is being portrayed just as he hates them, and not just to hate them in mind but also to pick up our own weapon and fight against it.

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